

THE BLIND MAN AND THE SOCIAL
WORKER

Christopher Easton

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BY
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The rapid expansion of social work has been a feature of the last quarter century. Among other fields the social workers have entered that of supervising the blind. For example, a generation ago in New York City the Board of Aldermen made an appropriation annually to a society made up of blind persons which in turn distributed the money. Now a group of social workers, under the Department of Public Charities, attends to this matter. In the ancient world the problem of the blind was solved by giving them special privileges. To the statement that this meant principally the privilege of begging I would say that there were other privileges and that begging in the ancient world had a different status from that which it now has. In democratic communities it is considered that begging does not comport with the dignity

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of the individual and the vast majority of the blind in this country have accepted this dictum. Nevertheless until quite recent times in Spain one of the duties of the king was to wash the feet of ten blind beggars publicly each year. In one of the Hindu scriptures in listing the duties of the Brahmin it was stated that it was the duty of the wealthy Brahmin to give alms *and of the poor Brahmin to receive alms.* (The italics are mine.) The Hindu reader would not need them. In Persia (where the writer was born) mendicant Dervishes are not only highly respected, but they also constitute the body that transmits the literary classics of the country to the common people.

This article is based on the assumption that only the blind can understand the blind. Communication between the blind and the seeing is necessarily stilted. The blind have always led the blind and in more senses than one. The social worker deplores this natural association. He wants the blind man to have his principal dealings with the seeing in what the social worker terms, "a normal environment." But the social worker does not know. He cannot "see" with the blind man, let alone feel with him. The blind man can never have a normal environment. Let me give something of his psychology.

The domain of the blind par excellence is that of the mind and of the emotions. It is tragedy twice compounded when a blind man spends most of his time doing those little things which are automatic for the seeing. To draw out eating, bathing, dressing, and getting about, not only emphasizes a blind man's ineffectiveness but also takes these hours which he might de-

vote to higher uses. In my own case my constant effort is to simplify my physical environment and my adjustment to it. I should like to wear as few clothes as the law allows and live on black bread and sour milk and reside in a house as bare of superfluous furniture as the Persian peasant's adobe hut. Yet the public seems to expect us to spend years practicing some dextrous mechanical "stunt" to surprise them with.

Now the blind have special qualifications for intellectual work. At the start the blind constitute a cross section of the population, but their efforts to cope with their altered environment soon differentiates them along certain lines. They are automatically subjected to a mental discipline which is far more severe than any mental discipline that is now undergone by nine-tenths of the population,—in this country at least. If a blind man forgets where he has put something down he may have to spend hours looking for it where the seeing man would spend minutes. Unless he carries in the back of his consciousness a visualization of dangerous places, he may add to his handicapped condition or even lose his life. Contrast this with the happy-go-lucky attitude of the ordinary American youth or even of the ordinary American workman. The blind man develops not only a serviceable memory but also a sense of order, a careful, deliberate procedure, based on an appreciation of causal relations, and infinite patience. Contrast this with what we see in every-day life—people who cannot observe accurately, who cannot remember what they have observed, who, if they do remember, cannot draw

sound inferences, in a word people whose mental machinery may be whirring but without any meshing of cogwheels.

The experience of a blind man also tends to refine and deepen his emotions. His detachment from life not only gives him mental impartiality, and disinterestedness, but it also furnishes that atmosphere in which alone spiritual insights can be gained. Some very busy men have achieved nobility of soul, but it has only been true because they have reserved for themselves, at all costs, quiet hours. The ordinary man bent on some definite object does not inquire into values. This very thing is what a blind man is in a favorable position to do. His previous world of traditional values has toppled and he must reconstruct it. Then too nearly every blind man gets an unusual insight into the heart of human sympathy. Men show him their best side and the effect on him cannot but be beneficial. The limpid clearness of Helen Keller's world, its untouched loveliness, would have been impossible, if she had had the usual amount of experience with human guile and selfishness. The animals too widen the sympathies of the blind. I have seen horses struggling to get out of a morass, and cows contemplating the unsolving mystery of a slide-bar gate, but now that fate has placed me alongside them in their hopeless struggle to accomplish simple things, they seem much nearer to me than before.

What response have workers for the blind and possible employers of the blind made to blind psychology? Almost the reverse of what they should have made. A few of the blind with natural aptitude in that direction have been trained to become

professional musicians, but the emphasis for the great majority of blind has been put on mechanical training.

Some blind men have trained themselves in salesmanship, but this should not be encouraged as it is practically impossible for the blind to sell anything without—whether they wish to do so or not—capitalizing their infirmity. Then, too, if the blind man is the mentally advanced individual we have described, he is not likely to possess the trading instinct—something highly developed among savage tribes. Obviously the blind man cannot become an artisan. The more skilled kinds of mechanical work require selection, judgment, an appraising eye, i. e., the very qualifications a blind man lacks. So only routine mechanical work is left for him. Now in industry and even in agriculture the repetitive processes are daily being transformed to machinery. A generation ago a blind man could earn unskilled wages sawing up cordwood or mixing concrete, but today that is impossible. A blind plow horse is almost as efficient as a seeing plow horse, but a blind man is infinitely less efficient than the machines which can do what he can in almost every mechanical field. Why load onto the blind man the additional humiliation of working against a machine?

But say those interested in the blind, he must do something if only to maintain physical and mental balance. Granted, I both saw wood and mix concrete for this reason, but I do not do it for a living. In fact I believe the money I pay out for new blades and sharpening would meet the charge for machine sawing. Before outlining the useful lines of work a blind man

may do, let me give what in my opinion are the four main needs of the blind to secure which cooperation with the sighted is essential: ONE—The blind must be secured against want and the dread of want. Some primitive societies have made away with the crippled and blind, but a society which has allowed them to live cannot escape the responsibility for guaranteeing them the minimum of sustenance. A blind animal that is not domesticated dies. The blind man must have what the domesticated blind horse gets—his bed and board.

TWO—But it is not enough to guarantee the “necessaries of life”, that cruel phrase which the AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR THE BLIND would have an integral part of every blind relief law. The blind need special protection of their personal rights and liberties. Ordinary constitutional guaranties have no meaning for those who are dependent on others for the necessities of life. The average subject of an unlimited monarchy has more rights than many a dependent, not only in our almshouses but also in our homes. Our whole political system is based upon the conception of competing, and more or less self-sufficient individuals. Only special laws can give rights to individuals who are incapable of fighting for them. The idea of political equality is so strong in the minds of most people in this country that the most obviously needed privileges for the blind are denied them. Let me give two illustrations: The blind home and social centre of the MINNESOTA STATE ORGANIZATION OF THE BLIND is located one block—a very long one—from the boundary line between the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. A committee called on

the management of the street railway company requesting that the blind be allowed to ride this block free and was refused. So most of the Minneapolis members of the society are crossing an arterial highway three times on each round trip to the home. Repeated efforts of the blind to induce the Treasury Department to give a monopoly of the news stands in Federal buildings to the blind have failed.

THREE—The blind need installations, beyond their own ability to create, for the purpose of occupational therapy. This should be obvious.

FOUR—The blind need assistance in securing employment of a suitable kind. This, the least important need of the blind, is the one most stressed by the social workers.

That the majority of the blind can ever become self-supporting in the true sense of the word is very doubtful. Massachusetts tried it and an official commission declared that for every dollar the blind earned the state spent two. Missouri is now trying it on a large scale. A recent biennial report of the Missouri state commission on the blind may be summarized as follows: "Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was spent by the commission. Probably two hundred thousand dollars of this amount was spent in an effort to make the blind self-supporting. The report of the Springfield workshop is typical. Free raw material from the state \$800, paid in wages to the blind, \$890; total operating expenses \$1,867.00, received from sales \$1,080.

There is no greater occupational handicap than that of blindness with two possible

exceptions, insanity and complete paralysis. Nevertheless there is, I believe, a considerable field for the enlargement of employment opportunities. In all kinds of mechanical work the blind need special setups and special sighted assistance. The only way to bring such arrangements about on any satisfactory scale is, I believe, a law requiring employers to employ a percentage of the handicapped, as is the case in France with regard to disabled soldiers. Employers will not then need to be urged by social workers to make such arrangements. It will be to their interest to do so.

The big and practically unexploited field of employment for the blind is that of mental and executive work. The qualifications for such work that the blind possess I have indicated. The main difficulty is popular prejudice. For example, every office of any size needs an information clerk. The qualifications are wholly mental, not at all physical. Yet have you ever come across a blind information clerk?

I have not gone into the matter in detail, but I believe there are many communities where the fees paid to jurors alone would provide a modest pension to the needy blind. There might be a few court cases where seeing jurors were required, but certainly in the great majority of cases a blind jury would do better than the prevailing type of jury. No blind jury would award extravagant alimony because the plaintiff knew how to wear her clothes. Their minds would be concentrated on the evidence. Blind men could be found who would do well on any public board or commission of a non-technical character.

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